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Experiencing Paramilitarism: Understanding the Impact of Paramilitaries on Young People in Northern Ireland

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**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

**CENTRE FOR
CHILDREN'S
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RESEARCH FINDINGS

Experiencing Paramilitarism: Understanding the Impact of Paramilitaries on Young People in Northern Ireland

Siobhán McAlister, Clare Dwyer and Nicola Carr

This paper sets out findings of research examining young people's experiences of safety, informal control and policing in their communities.

The research was funded by British Academy/Leverhulme and data collection was completed in 2016. The fieldwork was carried out across three research sites in Northern Ireland. These were geographically spread and reflected different ethno-identities. One site was predominantly Protestant/Unionist, another predominantly Catholic/Nationalist and the third site was based in an interface area and data was collected from both Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist communities. The sites were deliberately selected in order to reflect the experiences of those growing up in communities with a continued paramilitary presence. The aim was to give voice to children and young people, particularly those victimised, in order that these add to the public and political discourse. The participants included 38 young women and men aged between 16 and 25 years, and 29 adult service providers including representatives from: local youth and community projects, mediation and restorative justice projects, the Youth Justice Agency and the PSNI.

The paper comprises an overview of some of the themes to emerge from the research with young people, with reference to paramilitaries. It demonstrates the multiple impacts of growing up in communities with a paramilitary presence, in which children are both the direct and indirect victims of violence. In doing so, it raises concerns about the extent to which the State is meeting its obligation as signatories of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNCRC) to protect and promote: the best interests of the child (Art 3); the right to survival and development (Art 6); the right to freedom of association (Art 15); the right to protection from violence or abuse (Art 19); the right to freedom from exploitation (Art 36); the right to freedom from torture, cruel or inhuman treatment or punishment (Art 37); and the right to protection and care when affected by armed conflict (Art. 38).

PERCEPTIONS ON THE EXTENT OF PARAMILITARIES IN COMMUNITIES

Across the three areas there was a sense that there was still a high incidence of paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. While some felt there was less of a presence than there had been in the past, many perceived that paramilitaries still control certain communities, or parts of them, and know everything that is happening. Many respondents felt that young people in particular were a focus of paramilitaries because they spend a lot of time in public places or are involved in what some define as 'anti-social behaviour':

*'The paramilitaries are everywhere, you can't escape them and it's just really dangerous. You can walk into someone's house and you're guaranteed someone's probably watching you go into a house. They're, like you cannot walk round **** [area] and feel safe. No matter what, there's someone watching you'*
(Aidan, aged 16)

It became clear that the reason many perceive a prolific presence was due to both personal experience and the circulation of local stories about who has been the most recent victim of intimidation or attack.

Many young people reported that the identity of those associated with paramilitary activity was widely known within communities, as they were typically community members and living in close proximity:

'... they're sitting having tea with people, they're there, they're in the heart of the community. They're opening taxi ranks, they're opening shops, they're opening cafes'

(Aaron, aged 19)

This sense in which paramilitaries were both people to be feared within communities and also of the communities which they were seen to 'protect', created a source of ambivalence for many young people.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT EXPERIENCES

All of the young people had knowledge and indirect experience of paramilitaries, including knowing friends or family members who had been targeted or involved in these groups, or being aware of their presence in their communities. As Laura noted, this was simply a feature of some neighbourhoods:

'... if you actually live down here and you run about down here, everyone knows, everyone sees it, everyone I'd say has experienced it in some way, or came in touch with the paramilitaries'

(Laura, aged 17)

The profound effect of what we have defined as 'indirect experiences' should not be under-estimated. Some young people spoke of feeling fearful and unsafe in their communities, hearing regular stories of people in the area being attacked, or witnessing the aftermath of such attacks themselves. Speaking of an incident just the week prior to involvement in the research Eric (aged 18) told us that someone he knew had **'got beat to bits ... got badly beaten head to toe'** to the extent that Eric **'was physically sick looking at him'**.

Twenty young people (54% of the sample) also had direct experiences of paramilitaries. This included witnessing or personally experiencing: shootings, fines, exiling, beatings, bans and curfews, intimidation (e.g. personal threats, threats of which they were informed of through the police, threats and naming via social media and being 'moved on'). Importantly, and from a child rights perspective, much of the intimidation and abuse started and took place when these participants were still children. It should, therefore be understood as a violation of children's rights, constituting not only an abuse of 'power' but also child abuse. It was, and is, also taking place in a post-conflict, post-ceasefire context.

A significant number of young people had experienced a range of types of abuse, and on multiple occasions. Eamonn, for example, was 18 at the time of interview and was under an exclusion order¹. He was first assaulted at the age of 15 and received a further two beatings before receiving an official warning to leave the town. Eamonn now walked with a limp as a result of his injuries. John, now aged 19, spoke of how he had been **'kidnapped ... for 72 hours', 'held against my will', 'tortured' and 'scared for [my] life'** at the age of 14/15 after continual warnings about selling drugs.

Aidan spoke of witnessing his father being shot when he was 13 or 14 years old:

*'[They] kicked in my dad's door while I was standing there ... and shot my dad five times, and I was made to watch it. I tried to run out the door, one of the c**ts stood up at the door, scruffed me, banged my head off two doors and threw me into the top of a staircase that had no carpet in it so it was just nails. And I was left there'*

(Aidan, aged 16)

Laura described an incident that she witnessed as a child (aged 6), when her uncle had been beaten by paramilitaries and came to her house for refuge:

'My uncle ... came home with blood pouring all over the place and he's had to walk from, just by himself, he had to pick himself up off the road and drag himself home, you know like that, you know...' (Laura, aged 17)

David, like some others, accepted that his actions might have brought him to the attention of paramilitaries, but he felt the response was excessive:

'I actually got beat up by a paramilitary member two years ago, but that was, there was just drink involved ... But that there was just over the top so it was ... I got my hand broke and beat with a chair, a metal chair, so I did' (David, aged 22)

Some spoke of the psychological as well as physical abuse experienced at the hands of paramilitaries. This included low-level but constant surveillance (defined by the young people as being watched), threats and goading. Shay explained that in addition to a physical beating, he was taunted emotionally causing him to respond angrily, providing further justification for more violence against him. Shay's friend had hanged himself three years prior to interview, and Shay had found him:

'The boys who hit me a couple of times, they know what gets to me ...'

*I found my best friend like and they just, they slagged me, they slag over it all the time. They just start saying things because they know I'll f**king shout back'*

(Shay, aged 22)

The range of experiences of the young people in this research demonstrate the power that those defining themselves as paramilitaries hold over children and young people in some communities. Local knowledge combined with reputation, power and often weapons, results in a heightened level of informal as well as formal control over the community, and inevitably impacts young people's sense of safety, their levels of vigilance and how they experience their community.

IMPACT OF PARAMILITARY PRESENCE, THREATS AND ATTACKS

Lost childhood: Because their everyday activities would come to the attention of paramilitaries, some young people spoke of a lost childhood. This was because many activities associated with being young (hanging about, messing about, being loud, drinking etc.) were defined as 'anti-social' by paramilitaries. Explaining why he was threatened by paramilitaries when younger, Aaron said:

'Mucking about, you know, just, you know, being a wean [a child], being young. Maybe just making muck bombs or whatever, just carrying on. But you couldn't do any of that, you couldn't have a childhood really, you know? (chokes up) Or they would dictate it' (Aaron, aged 19)

Drug and alcohol use: Many reported that those young people who were attacked by paramilitaries were either drug users or (low-level) drug dealers. There was a general sense, however, that if threats and attacks aimed to make communities safer and rid them of drugs, that it was actually doing the

¹ Eamonn had been issued an Exclusion Order from a paramilitary organisation stating that if he did not leave the local area he would be shot. The fact that he was under threat was communicated to him by the Police Service (PSNI).

opposite. Many of those who had been attacked, or knew others who had been attacked, noted that drug and/or alcohol use had become worse as a result (e.g. to help them cope). Aoife spoke of her friend, a heavy drug user, who had been shot through both knees:

'He turned to drugs, he turned to them even worse. Do you know what I mean? So it's a nightmare for everyone. They [paramilitaries] get involved far too much. They put the fear of god in them, if anything they put the fear of god in people and when they go around throwing threats the way they do is it any wonder people are turning to drugs?'

(Aoife, aged 19)

Furthermore, in many instances young people noted an inherent hypocrisy regarding paramilitaries and their approaches to regulation of drug use. In some cases, young people perceived this as paramilitaries' attempts to control the market for drugs in a local area. In the words of Laura:

*'I don't understand also because ... the paramilitaries make the young people sell the drugs, and then the young people maybe get into debt, and what happens if young people don't pay them the money they are owed, and then the paramilitaries would beat the s**t out of them ... the boy who they gave the drugs to sell in the first place'*

(Laura, aged 17)

Mental health: Others spoke of the impact on their mental well-being - anger, fear of leaving the house, feeling suicidal and having to seek psychiatric help. For instance, Aoife spoke of the immediate impact of a threat she received when she was seventeen:

'... I was the one that was locked in the house and put on six months watch, suicide watch ...'

(Aoife, aged 19)

Joe spoke of the long-term impact resulting from his kidnapping and assault when he was aged 17:

'For up to a year and a half, two years after like. See the uneasy feeling, the fear it's surprising that it does put into you like. You can act as hard as you want but you see when there's boys coming after you with guns telling you they're going to shoot you and your brother, they're going do you with a shotgun, as big as you are hey, the fear's there, know what I mean?'

(Joe, aged 22)

Paul spoke of the fear he was currently living under. He had been subject to threats and an assault and had briefly been involved with a paramilitary group. He had left the country for six months to 'clear my head' when he realised that he was being recruited and his family were subsequently forced to move from the area due to constant threats. Before returning to Northern Ireland, Paul had been informed by a family member 'there's a death threat going about for you ... you're not allowed back in Northern Ireland ...'. As these 'informal' threats are never formally lifted, he now lived in continual fear:

'I am living with fear, I'm living with paranoia and one day I'll be fine, one day I'll be walking round the house edgy, as you can probably imagine. Yesterday if you would've seen me I was, I couldn't take the smile off

my face, but then today I'm sort of, do you know what I mean? Just, it's really mixed emotions, it's really, it's hard to ex-, it's, it's like one minute you could be fine and then one minute, not having like a panic attack but it'd be right under a panic attack, like thinking something's going to happen. Like do you know when you get them feelings, your body senses stuff?'

(Paul, aged 22)

A number of young people in one area also suggested a link between a young person taking his own life and having been beaten and shot by paramilitaries in the past. This theme arose in a second community. Speaking of his knowledge of paramilitary attacks, David noted:

'... a few friends actually. One of them was selling drugs a few, it must've been four or five years ago, and ah he got in debt. He was getting threatened and all, and I think the pressure... he ended up hanging himself so he did'

(David, aged 22)

Indeed, the perceived relationship between attacks on young people and poor mental health was a consistent theme:





'I have a friend that was shot like ... he's tried to commit suicide at least five times, you know, and he's never, he's not left the house. He's never going to be right again, you know? It's messed him up completely like [cries]. How can they justify that?'

(Aaron, aged 19)

Further exclusion: Some of the most marginalised young people – those with drug and alcohol problems, precarious housing, difficult family circumstances – experienced further exclusion and marginalisation as a result of coming to the attention of paramilitaries. Eamonn, for example, who had been excluded from his community spoke of the impact on his family life and support networks, his training and employment; he could not attend either as they were in the town from which he was exiled, therefore he lost both:

'I actually got sacked and everything off my job because of it. Threw out of the Tech. They said I can't be in the Tech because I'm putting other people's lives at threat. It's shocking like' **(Eamonn, aged 18)**

Aidan who had watched his father being shot, and who had himself been assaulted in the process, spoke of how his life had spiralled out of control as a result:

*'... it's made my life miserable. I've went on drugs, I've went on drink, I've went off drugs, I went off drink, I went back on them. My life's a complete shambles, I've, I was in the middle of sitting my GCSEs as it happened, I left school with one GCSE, and that's because I'd had it since f**king fourth year. That's the only reason I passed. They f**ked my life up completely ...'*

(Aidan, aged 16)

Aidan's anger manifested in violence and other negative behaviours, which brought him to the attention of paramilitaries again, resulting in a further physical attack.

John and others also explained that in receiving a 'community punishment', you became labelled within the community. In this respect, such 'punishments' can have exclusionary effects similar to criminal sanctions:

'Actually you've got, you've got a name, paramilitaries give you a name and it sticks, like mud. Mud sticks, it doesn't matter how much you've changed' **(John, aged 19)**

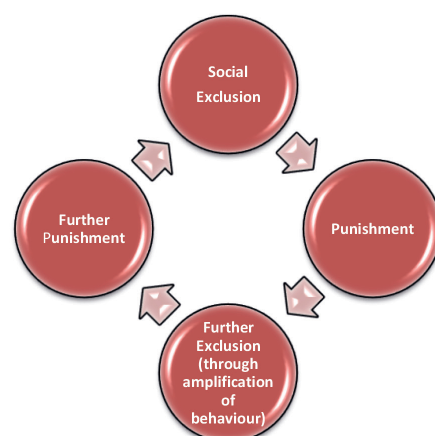
Such examples demonstrate a cycle of punishment and exclusion – with already vulnerable/ socially excluded young people being punished and this punishment leading to further exclusion in lives.

Fighting back: It was suggested that in some contexts some young people were responding by fighting back – setting up their own groups, acting up, joining 'the hoods'. Kevin explained 'the cycle' as follows:

'... it's a whole hierarchical system. Right, the big man sends the threats, the middle man like is the messenger, the lower boy gets battered, and then the wee man fights back, and the big man just goes, just a circle and circle and circle' **(Kevin, aged 16)**

Some felt that young people 'acting up', being 'hoods' or refusing to pay intimidation money was a form of resistance to paramilitary control. This, however, resulted in these young people being further targeted, and in the words of one young person also '**outcast by the rest of the community**' because of their behaviour. This is a further example of the relationship between exclusion and punishment, and how even when young people are employing more agency, punishment essentially still exacerbates exclusion.

Figure 1: The Cycle of Exclusion



The cycle of exclusion demonstrates that those who are already excluded, those who have complex and chaotic lives may be those most vulnerable to punishment. Punishment then, not only exacerbates the very behaviours some are punished for in the first place (drug and alcohol use, violence), but further erodes these young people's access to justice (for fear of reprisals)



and their power to participate in their communities (due to the labels they now have).

Behavioural change?: Paradoxically, some of those who sustained the worst physical injuries explained how their experiences with paramilitaries had, eventually, led to a cessation of the behaviour which had brought them to the attention of paramilitaries in the first place. However, given that many were given warnings or graded beatings (i.e. they became more severe), it is unsurprising that there was an eventual cessation. Rory (aged 25) who had been involved in low-level drug dealing and had been bundled into a car, taken away and beaten, reported *'I'll never do it again, because I learnt my lesson'*. Rory attributed his cessation in dealing, which primarily funded his own drug taking, directly to this experience. He spoke of feeling suicidal and of the fear he felt for himself and his family as a result of his experiences. He was aware of others who had been shot by paramilitaries, and in his words his family had *'lost enough people'*.

In these cases, therefore, we see that changes or 'transformations' in young people's behaviour came at a heavy cost and often after repeated threats and/ or experiences of abuse. For the most part, however, and as demonstrated above, young people reported that intimidation and beatings did not change behaviour. This was primarily because the behaviour they were being 'punished' for was not deemed by them to be harmful in the first place; they were not guilty of what they had been accused of; the 'punishment' led to an intensification of the behaviour as a result of trauma or resistance.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS PARAMILITARIES

Young people often had mixed feelings about paramilitaries. On the one hand they felt their actions were excessive/ brutal, unfair and hypocritical especially given the illegal behaviour paramilitaries themselves may be involved in. Within

each of the areas some argued that paramilitarism was now closely related to the drugs trade, and that community protection was less of a priority than it had been in the past:

'But nothing is about like protecting communities or anything like that anymore, it's all about their money and the drugs, which completely goes against what they are supposed to be there for anyway' (Maria, aged 22)

Yet the same young people, and others, also spoke of how these groups/ individuals acted as community protectors, from supposed drug dealers, those who 'wreck' communities and sex offenders (referencing paedophiles and rapists).² Fraser commented:

'Like how am I meant to feel safe if there's a rapist up round the corner or a murderer around the back, you know? ... So the paramilitaries are good for that like, because they get those type of people out'
(Fraser, aged 20)

There was also a sense that they and/ or their communities perceived the criminal justice system to be ineffective or inefficient. This they felt, could explain the continued presence and support of paramilitaries. Brian explained:

'The police, I feel like the police only do things right ten per cent of the time, maybe not even. Like police, I just rarely think police do things right, so they're, I really, I, I would be much happier knowing if my community was police-free and only controlled by a paramilitary organisation in terms of justice and crime. I'd be much happier to know that if something goes wrong I'm dealing with them and not the police'
(Brian, aged 20)

The swiftness of 'community justice' and the value of a local system of control was reiterated by others:

'... it's different with the police, you know, someone could smash a window, if you ring the police they'll be like "oh we don't know who it was", because people are in, tight-knit in the community, including the paramilitaries, they're more than likely able to find out who it was, when it happened, and can give them a slap on the wrist or whatever they need done for it' (Natalie, aged 20)

WHY ATTACKS ARE NOT REPORTED TO THE POLICE

'Nobody has the balls to stand up to them to be able to stop them, like the police can't do it so what's the chance of anybody else being able to do it? ... nobody really has a way of stopping them because no matter how many Agreements they sign there is always going to be one that all they have to do is break away, start their own [group/ organisation], and there's another one that started up anyway' (Debbie, aged 22)

Across all of the communities it was noted that threats or attacks were generally not reported to the police. This suggests that official police records/ statistics on 'paramilitary style incidents' are a serious under-estimate. In fact, only one of the young people who had been personally intimidated, kidnapped, beaten, shot or exiled told us that this had been reported to the police. In this case it was because the exclusion order was communicated to them by the police.

There were a number of reasons why young people did not report to the police. These included:

- a perception that the police could not or would not do anything
- a strong belief that in many cases the police already know who these people are, and do nothing about it;
- fear of reprisals/ do not want to be viewed as a tout;

2 In our interviews with professionals there was no discussion of a paramilitary focus on alleged sex offenders.

- poor relationship with or lack of trust in the police (including previous negative encounters); and
- a feeling among some young people that they ‘deserved it’ because of their behaviour.

This latter issue is of particular concern, as some young people referred to the fact that in retrospect they felt that the ‘punishment’ they had received had ‘taught them a lesson’. While, they had suffered injury themselves some said that if an issue arose for them (e.g. their house was broken into), they would consider bringing it to the attention of paramilitaries rather than the police.



JOINING UP?

Only two young people with whom we spoke claimed to be/ have been a member of a paramilitary group themselves. Others did, however, claim to know of young people who were members, and many felt that young people were still being recruited. Most had an opinion as to why young people might be attracted to such groups. What is important to reiterate, however, is that overall there was much less knowledge or experience of young people as ‘perpetrators’ of this form of violence, than there was of young people as victims.

The young people identified a range of reasons why young men in particular might join these groups. Such factors demonstrate a relationship between social exclusion, marginality and paramilitarism similar to the relationship we found with victimisation. They felt that those most vulnerable to

recruitment are: family members (e.g. the sons of those currently involved); those searching for a sense of identity (power, masculinity, culture); and those who are in debt to paramilitaries.

Family and community pathways: With regards to family connections, Jess, who had such a connection herself felt:

‘See it’s families as well like. If you’re born into [name of paramilitary organisation] family then like there’s a good chance the boys in the family are going to be in the [organisation] as well’

(Jess, aged 18)

These intergenerational pathways were recognised across the communities and linked with community and cultural factors – what children learn from a young age about history, their culture and their community, and indeed what they are often exposed to. As Tam said:

‘... they’re brainwashed. It’s what they know, it’s what they grew up, it’s what they heard round them, “up the [name of paramilitary organisation], up this, up”, you know? That’s all they know’

(Tam, aged 22)

Many also spoke of a search for a personal identity, rather than a cultural identity as such. They knew that those in their community who had an identity, a reputation, power and money were paramilitaries. Aoife, for example, suggested that some aspired to this to the extent that they were mimicking the behaviours of paramilitaries:

‘[They are] all boys, sixteen and seventeen, and maybe eighteen, do you know what I mean? And they, that’s the sort of example the paramilitaries are leading because now the younger ones think that they can sell it [drugs], take it and act like they’re in a paramilitary when they aren’t ...’

(Aoife, aged 19)

Such actions, of course, would bring these young people to the attention of paramilitaries.

Exploitation: There was also a view that children and young people are exploited by paramilitaries, to do their ‘dirty work’, sell drugs and issue threats. It was felt that some agreed because they are in debt:

‘... there would be a few people that I have known that have been given the choice to either pay their debts they have to paramilitaries, or join up. And they can’t afford to pay the money, then they join up because it is either that or they are the ones getting a beating or whatever’

(Maria, aged 22)

‘I think there’s certain members, I don’t know that get the young people to sell drugs ... So, and then they get in debt and they sign up and it’s just ... stuff like that there’

(David, aged 22).

Debbie on the other hand, felt that her friend who had joined a paramilitary group had done so as he was searching for a sense of belonging he did not otherwise have in his life:

‘I actually grew up with them in the care system, so they didn’t really have much family anyway so maybe he thought this was going to be like, a way of being like, like in a group with someone ...’ (Debbie, aged 22)

Callum (aged 25) who had been involved with paramilitaries for three years also said that he had joined **‘to have a family’**. Paul who had, for a short time, also been involved in a paramilitary group again linked this involvement to a lack of family support. His account clearly demonstrates how powerful adults took advantage of him at a vulnerable time in his life:

‘... like my family were a good family but it was lack of family being there. I had that much going on in my head with other things ah that I felt like I needed a bit of, like they act, like they act like your friends more, sort of reeled you in on like a fishing rod. Like “oh you’ve got a wee problem there, a wee problem here, we’ll help



you with this, with that”, et cetera, et cetera ... But I didn't realise, well I didn't realise what it was at the time, and whenever I realised, whenever I properly clicked on I was like ooh this isn't, this isn't me like'

(Paul, aged 22)

The search for power and safety:

The issue of power emerged in many discussions of why young people might become involved in such groups. Young people felt that being involved brought a reputation and respect, even if borne out of fear. In communities with limited opportunities where young people see that those with power are those who are feared, this can be a strong motivating factor. As George said:

'They [young people who join] feel, they feel power. Like walking about by yourself and you've got this person who's in front of you right, and you can't hit him and you can't go near him because he's got power. Obviously then you want to feel a bit more power, so when you join that obviously you go around and bully people, and they can't touch you because ... if they touch you they're going to get whacked, so you feel a wee bit more power'

(George, aged 18)

The issues of power and safety were heavily linked. There was the belief among some that young people joined because they may be safer 'in' than 'out'. Jess, who had friends her age in a paramilitary group felt safety was a contributing factor:

'Safety as well, well they think it's safety. Like they think it'd be safer being in the group than actually not ...' **(Jess, aged 18)**

Not only would being a part of an organisation give them power, but it would also give them protection, especially if they were involved in behaviour for which they would likely be punished. Hence, for these young people, the reasons for joining might be similar to those who were in financial debt to paramilitaries.

The various motivations for 'joining up' illustrate the complexity of wider issues around structural concerns such as a lack of opportunity, social marginalisation and a sense of hopelessness. Added to this, young people's ties and attachment to groups through family and community provides an 'only option' for some young people. These structural, political and cultural factors illuminate a broader issue of identity and purpose for many young people, with some linking group membership to not only an ethno-cultural identity, but also establishing masculinity and reputation, which brings with it a sense of protection.

SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

The level and nature of supports varied across the communities. In two of the areas, young people were very positive about a mediation/ restorative justice project, in the third most (but not all) were sceptical of the local mediation/ restorative justice project. While knowledge or experience of support services other than such projects seemed to be limited, some young people drew on pre-existing supportive relations with key workers (e.g. through the Youth Justice Agency, homelessness support) or youth workers.

For others, however, speaking out was simply deemed too risky. To do so could bring retaliation because as Aaron noted, you don't know *'who talking to who.'* Or it might bring more punishment or stigma as it could draw attention to the negative behaviour some young people were involved in. As such, you *'take it on the chin', 'just get on with it'* or *'get used to it'.*

Yet the profound impact of the combination of difficulties some of these young people faced often reached crisis point. As noted, a number of the young people in two of the areas we visited experienced problematic alcohol and/ or drug use and/ or poor mental health. Sometimes it was this that brought them to the attention of paramilitaries, and this contact exacerbated these difficulties for some, and was a catalyst for others. Talking of the pressure caused by not speaking out and seeking

help, along with the worry that he may still be under threat, David told us:

'So see even for me like to tell people that I can trust, like the right people, it still feels like I'm doing wrong in my head, because it still feels like something's, something's going to come back of it. Like that's the last thing I want, because it's not the fact that like it would just be me that could end up, like people could go for family or threats could get made on other people and then it just causes a big, and then I know it's all to do with me. And then that's why I've got like depression and stuff, because you're constantly depressed thinking like, well what if this happens or what if this happens like' **(David, aged 20)**

Thus, when asked about services and supports young people often spoke of the lack of youth specific services for addressing drug, alcohol and mental health issues. In one area a significant number of young people spoke of the need for a Detox Centre, and relayed personal stories of seeking drug and alcohol support, and support for their mental health. Long waiting lists and prescription medication were the responses most often experienced.

The complexity of these young people's lives demonstrates the need for holistic responses to young people experiencing continued marginalisation and the legacies of the Conflict. It was apparent in all areas that there was a lack of sustained support and services beyond the community based youth and restorative justice projects.

CONCLUSION

The high levels of both direct and indirect experiences of paramilitary violence in this research raise serious concerns. Most had an experiential knowledge of paramilitaries from a young age, understanding the roles they play in their communities and the particular risks for children and young people. This impacted on many of their rights, including their freedom of movement, their right to play and leisure



and their feelings and rights to safety and security. A significant number of the sample had been victims of severe, and sometimes multiple instances of physical and psychological abuse as children, the impacts of which had continued into young adulthood. There is also evidence to suggest that some of the most marginalised young people, those with complex lives and unaddressed needs, are at most risk of paramilitary violence and exploitation.

None of the young people reported their experiences to the police, nor would they countenance doing so. Their concerns regarding repercussions and confidence in police (and wider questions of legitimacy) were factors in under-reporting. There is evidence of a compounding effect - if paramilitary activity is not addressed young people perceive this as paramilitaries being treated with impunity and therefore they have lower confidence in policing and other institutions of justice. There is also evidence relating to how patterns of power and control are sustained. This was apparent in that some young people, who themselves had experienced paramilitary attacks, also considered paramilitaries as 'protectors' and a first port of call for dealing with

criminality or external threat. Moreover, the complex motivating factors for young people's involvement with paramilitaries only shines a brighter light on the vulnerabilities and needs of many of these young people. The recruitment of children and young people should be understood in a similar way as the 'punishment' of children and young people. This is a violation of children's rights, constituting exploitation and child abuse.

The findings of this research point to a need to engage meaningfully

with children, young people and their communities to understand and address the impact of trauma, and the dynamics which sustain violence. They also demonstrate the need to address both structural and legacy issues including poverty, lack of investment in core services and lack of investment and sustainability of youth and community services and supports. This is important, not least because of the recent Executive commitments to tackling paramilitarism³ and specifically its wider impact on young people.⁴

STATES PARTIES SHALL TAKE ALL APPROPRIATE LEGISLATIVE, ADMINISTRATIVE, SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL MEASURES TO PROTECT THE CHILD FROM ALL FORMS OF PHYSICAL OR MENTAL VIOLENCE, INJURY OR ABUSE, NEGLECT OR NEGLIGENT TREATMENT, MALTREATMENT OR EXPLOITATION ...

-ART. 19, UNCRC

3 In response to the Fresh Start Agreement (2015), a Tackling Paramilitarism Programme (# Ending the Harm) was established which sets out a series of 38 commitments from the Northern Ireland Executive aimed at tackling Paramilitarism, including a commitment to prevent young people becoming involved in paramilitary activity (3.9 - Cross-departmental programme to prevent vulnerable young people being drawn into paramilitary activity).

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